

Viral Consciousness and Critique

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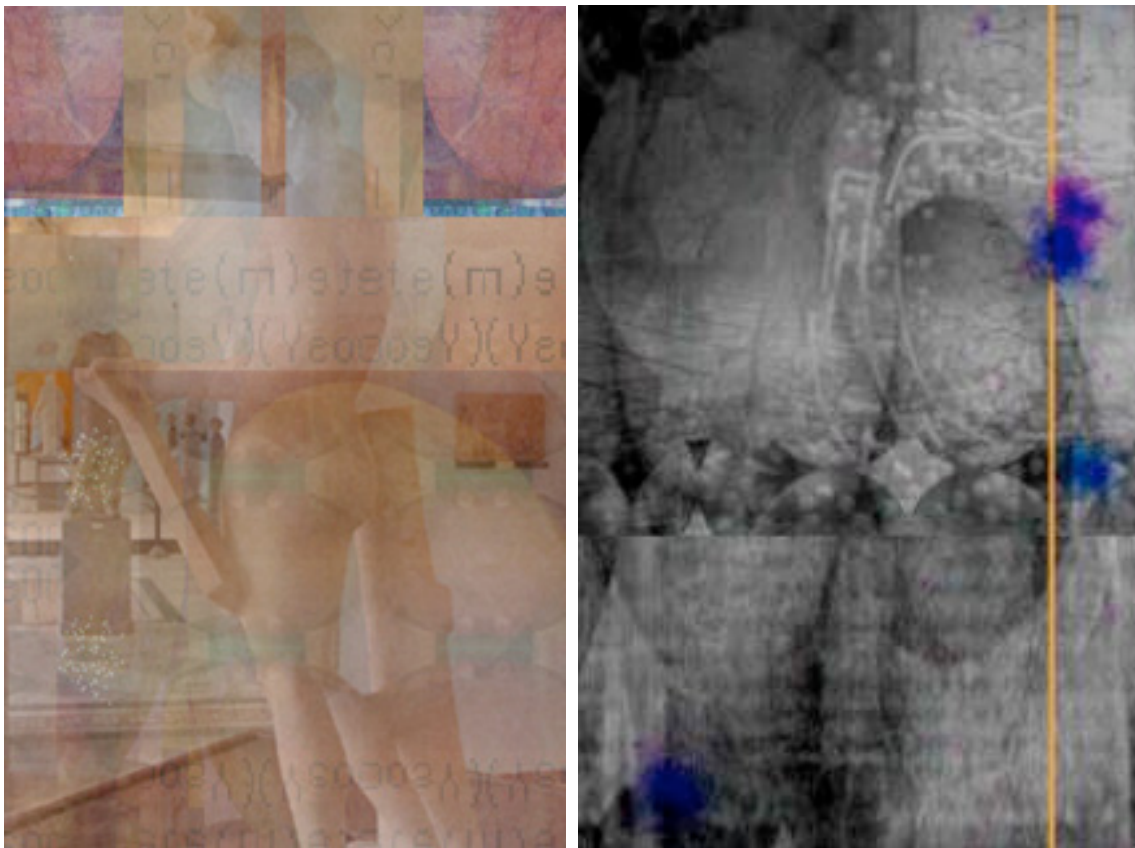
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as part of the seminar

Art, Politics and the Life Sciences

Art, Science and Critique

chaired by Kirk Woolford



Joseph Nechvatal, *pOrnOLOgic OverfLOw rtO* (2005)
88 x 66" diptych computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

Viral Consciousness and Critique

I

I will begin my talk and presentation with some reflections on the topic of artistic resistance based on Oron Catts's statement that: "art is only art insofar as it is oppositional, otherwise it is only design."

I find myself today in some general agreement with this idea - yet take intense exception to that qualifying term he uses twice: "only". I ask, why *only*? The tendency Oron sets up is binary and categorical. Something I think art should avoid participating in. Have we not learned by now that modernist reductionist assumptions are not easily changed by mere postmodern negations?

Though I agree that art must have an active, moral, non-compliant aspect, and resist defeatist resignation, have not we already learned from Nietzsche that the mind requires a combination of the philosophical and the artistic, the naturalistic and the creative, the logical/political and the poetic/metaphoric? For me, even oppositional art must fuel the chimerical imagination and tap the well-spring of myth.

Furthermore, cannot there be such a thing as an exceptional oppositional design? Think of Buckminster Fuller, who I observed as an undergraduate at Southern Illinois University. His *World Game* there was a unique experiment

to develop a computer model of planet earth that can be used to ‘play the world’ and develop ways of running the future for the benefit of all mankind. Fuller rejected the established religious and political notions of the past and adhered to an idealistic system of thought based on the essential unity of the natural world, and the use of experiment and intuition as a means of understanding it. He proposed that only an understanding of technology in the deepest sense would afford humans a proper guide to individual conduct and the eventual salvation of society.

Fuller rejected the conventional disciplines of the universities by ignoring them. In their place he imposed his own self-discipline and his own novel way of thinking in a deliberate attempt—as poets and artists do—to change his generation’s perception of the world.

Now the question of “opposition to what” must be asked.

Is it opposition to social institutions (the individual verses the collective)? To the commercialization of art? To the gallery system? To neoliberal hyper-capitalism, in general? To the explicit invasion and occupation of Iraq? To religious-political ideologues? To man’s inhumanity to man? To government propaganda?

Another problem for me is that Oron’s statement fails to recognize Dada thinking: the recognition of the simultaneous existence of affirmation and negation. So, I wish to stretch his statement in the direction of reversibility, visual challenge, culture hacking, and viral consciousness.

II

The new sensibility of *viral consciousness* that I am feeling, which is based on the merging of art, digital technology and ideas around life science (in my case artificial life), is based on my observation that art and science, after centuries of separation, are becoming entangled again through the discretization of the concept – one might say presumption – of objectivity. Richard Rorty writes persuasively about this discretization, as does Manuel Delanda; particularly in his book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*.

The *viral-connectivity sensibility* I am feeling is part and parcel with a noology of inter-subjectivity, which on one hand, gives art the license to appropriate scientific tropes, and on the other, lends science art's powers of non-utility, freedom, and even excess. It is this border-crossing that leads me to believe that we are entering a state of a new kind of natural magic – in some ways reminiscent of the Florentine 15th Century Neo-Platonists.

This sensibility is political in the sense that it is about knowledge that can transform things and states of the system. In that sense, I am maintaining that we are leaving the age of reductive political critique and analysis and entering into one of fecund synthesis; much like the poetic-mythic-scientific age of the early Renaissance.

The binding force of this synthesis is certainly *inter-subjective art* – with its possible novel comprehensions out of which new political possibilities may grow. These comprehensions are obtained by experiment/chance/inner-risk

– though need not be verified, nor repeated. Yes, the feeling I have is that we are trying to exit a dark age.

Viral conscious critique in art sets up possible alternative models within established models that suggest deep connectivity awareness. This viral conscious critique linkage is exactly what I look for when I look for interesting art today. In fact, this linking of the social, scientific, technical with the personal-sensual is what I imagine when I dare think of defining something as art. This is why when people chatter on of the ‘end of art’ I always feel that they are missing the point of art. They are missing art’s pleasurable and ethical force (of course) and its symbolic position as the *other*. But also its ability to create meta-meanings: comprehensive meanings based on connectivity which are obtained through sweeping synthetic maneuvers.

With viral conscious art, synthetic connectivity and penetration may be hidden, but vast. It, by definition, contains a plethora of intellectual strains in the interests of providing the foundation for a strategy of private discovery. Which can then be shared. Only when we acknowledge that viral conscious art partakes in synthetic connecting, might we enter the concept of social linkage into consideration, and only if we understand viral conscious art to be a synthetic psychological thought-vision.

The key scientific notion here for me is *omnijectivity*, which is the concept stemming from the discoveries of quantum physics which teaches us that mind (previously considered the subjective realm) and matter (previously considered as the objective realm) are inextricably linked. It is a political concept when applied to viral conscious art because omnijectivity is possible

only with the conflation of polarities; a stance which recognizes the mutual interpenetration that unites apparent opposites (specifically the subjectivity and objectivity). Viral conscious art, for me, is a computer-based art which takes seriously such scientific understandings and supersedes the tabular space laid out by classical thought. Viral conscious art then may promote experiences which are critical and oppositional because they are heterogeneous.

The basic function of viral conscious art is to create oppositional mental spaces that allow unaccustomed creative situations and sensations to connect socially. Given our society's heightening condition of connectivity, the heterogeneous spreading and non-hierarchical nature of the epistemological rhizome comes together in viral conscious art under the connected effect of the hyper-total. I define this visual hyper-totality as being produced by an all-over, elaborate, spread out distribution of visual incident which calls upon the optic procedure of spatial summation; a process which unconsciously totalizes the visual excess encountered.

These suppositions around viral conscious art, it seems to me, play into the history of abstract art, which teaches us that art may refuse to recognize all thought as existing in the form of purposeful representation, and that by scanning and penetrating the spread of representation, viral conscious art may formulate an understanding of the laws that provide representation with its organizational basis. As a result, in my view, it is viral conscious art's obligation to create decadent readings of our electronically activated social media environment.

This subject of viral conscious art, and the rhetorical strategy needed to explore it, especially interests me in that encounters with the computer create an opportunity for personal transgression and for a vertiginous ecstasy of thought. Hence, excelling the assumed determinism of the technological-based phenomenon inherent (supposedly) in our post-industrial information society.

Indeed, it seems to me that as human psychic energies are stifled and/or bypassed by certain controlling aspects of mass informational technology, such a personally transgressive ecstatic phenomenon will most likely increasingly break out in forms of viral conscious art. Similarly, simulation technology, when used in the creation of viral conscious art, will promote an indispensable alienation from the socially constructed self, necessary for the outburst of such ecstatic viral experiences and acts aimed against the controlling world's blandness. Thus the linkage mentioned before might provide, through significant viral conscious art, a fundamental antithesis to the authoritarian, mechanical, simulated rigidities of the controlling technical world.

So we need viral conscious art to offer poly-utopian visions. A society, developed in serious recognition of viral conscious art, for example, would take on the features of a mutually connected society interested in its total well-being of the species and that of its host: the earth. We are far from that with our simplistic scenarios of good and evil – white hats vs. black hats.

Oogenesis is another scientific term pertinent to a critical viral conscious art, as it demonstrates the connection between femaleness and maleness. Such

concepts are marvelous starting places for the creation and understanding of a new sort of political viral conscious art, but not one based in tautological inane statements composed of the trite simple statements and images that makes politics appear logically true, whether the assumed statements are true or false (which they generally are). The role of a mind-freeing imaginative viral conscious art, in the context of the so-called war on terrorism is, in my mind, a poly-utopian act of the utmost importance, as it is full of plausible emergent properties.

For me viral conscious painting is not merely a cultural product. It is a service product. As such, the quality of its service grants it its value. For example, digital painting is an alternative method of painting within the system and history of painting pictures. Viral conscious digital painting is neither in opposition to traditional hand painting, nor is it complicit with it. It is both simultaneously within and without the system of painting. It is viral.

The art of latent excess seen in my viral conscious paintings stands in defiance of the limits of ordinary perception and representational simulacra. Thus it is (or can be) about the opposition between the daily work-day and the transgressive/ecstatic moment. In a sense, viral conscious art attempts to set up a stable form of ecstatic transgression where one can go back and forth at will, via dissimulation.

I should say that most all of my ideas on this subject stemmed from the reading of Georges Bataille's book *Visions of Excess* (which I read in English translation in 1985) and after which I began to experiment with (and analysis

through my artwork) various artistic approaches towards latent excess and viral conscious art. In the terms Bataille proposes, any restricted economy, any sealed arrangement (such as an image, an identity, a concept, or a simulation) produces more than it can account for, hence it will inevitably be fractured by its own unacknowledged excess, and in seeking to maintain itself, will, against its own rationalized logic, crave rupture, expenditure, and loss.

III



Joseph Nechvatal, cOncerning Abu Graib, 132 x 66"
computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas triptych

My current (2006) chain of viral conscious a-life history paintings called *the new nOOlOlogy* are based on a fraction of the infamous digital photos from the Abu Graib abuse scandal. As such, they present embedded images of American torture. In *the new nOOlOlogy* American detainees are punished and humiliated, but then adorned, by me, through a viral conscious a-life process of viral attack. One laden with the latent viral conscious content of ambiguous bioterror.

These viral conscious acrylic paintings link together systems of exposed nerves with the torture at Abu Graib, now infected by viral attacks that undermine them. For me, the paintings of *the new nOOlOlogy* are an attempt at expressing America's deep demoralization. They are moral acts then, free with the truth of our penchant for desire. As such, these viral conscious paintings, I hope, contribute slightly to the downfall of the present reality.

Of course, the aestheticizing of the political (or the politicization of the aesthetic) is an important consideration here. I decided that I wanted my viral conscious work to use beauty as a seductive weapon long ago.

Just as I want my viral conscious work to be both poetic AND philosophic, specific AND general, critical AND imaginative; I want the work to be both scary AND beautiful.

Indeed, I think that the whiff of Thanatos gives beautiful viral conscious art an edge. And that this keeps the work both oppositional AND desirable.

Both Eros AND Thanatos.